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## **Examining Korean nationalisms, identities, and politics through sport**

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### **Abstract**

South Korea is a sport loving country. Indeed, sport is not simply a popular physical activity but it is a symbolically significant social practice in the country. In particular, sport operates as an important cultural resource through which a specific discourse of Korean nationalism is reproduced and disseminated. In this respect, as supplementary reading to the papers contained in this special issue, this editorial introduction identifies three major types of Korean nationalism, namely post-colonial anti-imperialist nationalism, pan-Korean ethnic nationalism, and the South Korean state's patriotic nationalism. It also looks at the way in which sport reflects and reinforces those nationalisms. The introductory essay ends with brief summaries of the six articles in this special issue.

**Keywords:** Korea, Sport, Nationalism, Post-colonialism, Inter-Korean relations,

### **Introduction**

In recent years, South Korea has displayed noticeable sporting ambition and success. The country has delivered a number of sports mega events, including the Asian Games, the Olympic Games, the FIFA World Cup Finals, and the IAAF World Championships, and central and municipal governments are keen to host a more diverse range of international sport competitions in the coming years (Bairner, Lee, & Tan, 2016). In addition, South Korean athletes have produced impressive performances at major international sport events.

Since 1984, for example, the national Summer Olympic team has consistently been ranked in the top ten nations on the medal table, the only exception being the Sydney Olympic Games in 2000. Furthermore, the nation has produced a number of individuals who have held or hold influential positions within international sport governing bodies. Amongst the best known names are those of Mr Kim Un-young and Mr Chung Mong-joon who served as vice presidents of the IOC and FIFA respectively. The evidence shows that South Korea has emerged as an influential nation in the world of sport.

Without doubt, it is remarkable to see the increasing sporting prowess of South Korea over the last three decades given the fact that the nation was one of the poorest in the world until the 1950s. Yet, Korean sport has not developed in a social and political vacuum. In fact, sport in Korea appears to be a highly nationalistic practice (Lee & Maguire, 2013; Ok & Park, 2014). In order to understand the nature and motivation behind such rapid sport development, in South Korea more specifically, one must take into account the historical trajectory that this nation followed during the twentieth century. In this regard, it is possible to identify three distinctive events that have had a particularly profound impact on contemporary Korean society and culture including sport. These are 1) the Japanese occupation, 2) the Korean War and the subsequent division of the nation, and 3) rapid economic growth under a series of military regimes. It may be an exaggeration to argue that these historical incidents have been the necessary conditions for the way in which sport has been institutionalised in Korea. Nonetheless, it is **just as** difficult to deny that the historical and political environment has significantly affected sport development in Korea (Ha & Mangan, 2002).

In this editorial introduction, therefore, I discuss how these historical occasions have influenced the structure of Korean politics and society and how sport works as a vehicle for

reflecting and reinforcing existing socio-political conditions. Particular attention is paid to the formation of a modern sense of Korean nationhood and to the way in which a specific sense of the nation and nationalism is collectively imagined and remembered through sport. This is mainly because nationalism explains the fundamental basis for the dominant political ideology in Korea (Shin, 2006) and because the country's planned sport development programme and its high-performance oriented sport policies are closely related to a nationalistic political mechanism (Cha, 2009; Lee, 2002; Joo, 2012).

## **Politics, nationalism and sport in Korea**

### *Post-colonialism and Korean Sport*

First of all, Korea is a post-colonial nation. The Korean people experienced a relatively short but very coercive period of Japanese imperialism for thirty-six years (1910-1945) and the memory of this highly repressive and exploitative colonial domination still shapes Korean's national consciousness to a considerable extent. In spite of the fact that Korea was liberated from Japan more than 60 years ago, the Japanese government's remorseless gestures, including visits by members of the political elite to the Yasukuni shrine in Tokyo where Class A war criminals and imperialists were buried, make Korean people feel uncomfortable. Hence, it can be argued that in the realm of cultural politics, at least for Koreans, the struggle against Japanese colonialism continues (Lewis, 2002). Understandably, therefore, one of the distinctive features of Korean national identity is anti-imperialist nationalism against the Japanese Occupation.

Sport is a cultural space where the most intense of anti-Japanese sentiment is aroused (Lee & Maguire, 2013). Thus, it is necessary to investigate how modern sporting culture began to

emerge as a socially and politically significant cultural practice during the colonial period in order to discern the precise relationship between sports and (post) colonialism. It should be noted that while modern sport was first introduced to Korea by British and American missionaries in the late nineteenth century, this new physical culture developed into organised and systematic forms during the colonial period (Lee H. R., 2000). Korean ethnic schools adopted physical education as an element of the core curriculum in order to foster physically and mentally strong Korean youths, and the number of sport clubs began to increase because sporting activities such as football and baseball were considered as a means of developing a modernised and rationalised body (Ha & Mangan, 1994; Koen, 2003). This suggests that sport became an important component of the modernisation projects that eventually helped to overcome Japanese imperialism. Moreover, nationalist groups regularly organised sporting events because these competitions were amongst the few social occasions through which Korean national identity could be awakened and the desire to be an independent nation could be conveyed to the large number of Korean people watching in the stadium (Lee, Ha, & Ok, 2015).

In post-colonial times, this anti-imperialist nationalism shows no sign of abating and a strong sense of anti-Japanese sentiment is still prevalent in Korean society. The intense sporting rivalry between Korea and Japan exemplifies the uneasy relations between the two nations. Many Koreans consider a sporting contest between the two as a must-win match at all cost as if beating the Japanese team was perceived as a form of symbolic revenge on its former coloniser (Mangan, Kwon, & Kim, 2013). In other words, defeating Japanese teams at the major sporting competitions offers many Korean people a cathartic moment that temporarily soothes deep emotional scars resulting from the humiliating collective memory of harsh colonial domination (Lee & Maguire, 2013). The two nations have also been rivals in the

domain of international sport governance. In the contest to host the 1988 Summer Olympic Games, the Japanese city of Nagoya and the South Korean capital, Seoul, engaged in a rather fierce bidding campaign, with the IOC eventually awarding the Games to Seoul (Pound, 1994). In 2002, on the other hand, Japan and South Korea co-hosted the FIFA World Cup Finals because FIFA was unable to choose a single winner of the World Cup bidding contest due to the equally attractive and highly competitive proposals that the two East Asian states had submitted (Lee J. W., in press). These quests to host sports mega events provide yet another example of Korea-Japan sporting rivalry, and are also a clear indication that, at least on the Korean side, post-colonial nationalism remains actively at work.

#### *Divided Korea and sport*

The fact that Korea is an ideologically divided nation with traumatic experience of a bloody civil war which claimed more than million people's lives has had profound implications for the development of Korean society. Soon after the nation was liberated from Japan in 1945, the Korean peninsula was partitioned into two parts by the United Nation's mandate and five years after the UN's trusteeship had been put in place, the Korean War broke out in 1950. This war ended in 1953 without a peace treaty being signed which means that North and South Koreas still technically remain at war. Furthermore, the emergence of Cold War political structures in the North East Asian region increased the political tension between communist North Korea and US-backed South Korea. More than a half-century of division has influenced the formation of the national consciousness of Korean people on the both sides of the armistice line (Yi, 2002). On the one hand, each Korea considers its counterpart as a political and military enemy. Understandably, anti-communism in the South and anti-American imperialism in the North constitute important components of national consciousness of the two Koreas respectively. These two politically incompatible national

identities also contribute to an intense rivalry between the two countries which leads occasionally to military clashes. On the other hand, as an ethnically homogeneous nation, there exists a strong desire for the reunification in both North and South Korea so that a unified Korean nation-state can be established. In fact, the reunification of the nation is the one of, if not the most, significant political projects in both North and South Korea (Jung & Rector, 2012). This ethnic nationalism makes occasional cooperation and partnership between the two sides possible in spite of escalating political and military conflict. In effect, therefore, there exist two distinctive types of Korean nationalism, namely 1) patriotic nationalism derived from the different political systems in the two Koreas and 2) ethnic nationalism originating from the shared culture and history of North and South Korea. The existence of these two nationalisms complicates the formation and development of nationalist politics within the Korean peninsula.

Sport in Korea directly mirrors these rather intricate North and South Korean relations. Given the intense political rivalry, at least until the late 1980s, international sporting competitions featured as a symbolic battlefield on which to display the ideological supremacy of one Korea over the other, and direct encounters between the two sides were especially seen as constituting a surrogate war between the two. In these circumstances, the North and South Korean governments systemically fostered talented elite athletes and subsidised the development of high-performance sport in order to win more medals and trophies at international tournaments (Ha & Mangan, 2002). This sporting arms race between North and South Korea shapes the sport development system and policy on the two sides of the border. At the same time, sport is also one of the few socio-cultural activities to show international audiences the two Korean governments' willingness to establish a unified Korean nation-state. While it is questionable whether inter-Korean sport can make a positive contribution to the

peace building process and ultimately realise reunification in any meaningful sense, it is difficult to deny that sport has a strong symbolic power to display a unified Korean identity both domestically and internationally (Cha, 2009; Lee & Maguire, 2009). The occasional organisation of a unified Korean team for international competitions and joint marches at the opening and closing ceremonies of sports mega events are examples of Korean ethnic nationalism being represented through sport.

### *Economic development under military dictatorship and Korean sport*

The characteristics of South Korean society cannot be fully grasped without consideration of the rapid economic growth that the country experienced in the second half of the twentieth century. From the 1960s to the 1990s, South Korea underwent a remarkable transformation from being one of the poorest countries in the world into one of the strongest economies. This rapid economic development was closely related to the military regime's initiative to foster an export driven and labour intensive manufacturing sector (Lee C. H., 1992). However, the military government's economic policy is still contentious because it involved undemocratic and exploitative practices. The ruling elites severely repressed any attempts to challenge their power, including pro-democratic protest and labour movement organisation, in order to engineer the government's developmental plan effectively (Minns, 2001). Under these conditions, no freedom of expression was guaranteed in society as a whole and many workers were obliged to tolerate abusive working condition. At the same time, this authoritarian military regime exploited nationalist sentiments to justify its control (Shin, 2006). In this respect, the government devised a number of nationalistic rituals and ceremonies to be regularly observed in public domains including schools. In addition, the regime also rediscovered historical relics and records in order to propagate nationalistic discourse, including inventing the myth of national heroes from the past. Through this nationalist project,



the military government was able to legitimise its repressive policies and effectively mobilise its people in the interests of a planned economic development programme. This political and social engineering eventually gave rise to notable but nonetheless controversial economic advances.

The military regime actively utilised sport as a political tool. Until late 1988 when the country hosted the Summer Olympic Games, South Korean athletes were generally not as competitive at major international sporting competitions as the government wanted. Given that international sporting success often stimulates nationalistic emotions that governments can utilise as a vehicle for national integration, it was undesirable for the ruling inner circle to witness such a dearth of sporting talent with the potential to win major international championship titles. In order to tackle this problem, the government opened the Korea national training centre in 1966 to identify and foster talented athletes systemically (Hong, 2011). While this sport development programme was intended to produce competitive athletes in the long term, the ruling elite also wanted to see immediate effects. With this in mind, the government launched the Presidential Cup Asian football championship, an annual event taking place in Seoul to which relatively weak Asian football teams were invited so that the South Korean national team could win matches comparatively easily. As a result, for the first five championships from 1971 to 1975, the South Korean team won the title three times including the inaugural Presidential Cup. Additionally, the South Korean government's desire to host major international sporting events was closely related to the military regime's nationalistic policy (Cho & Bairner, 2012). By hosting the 1986 Asian Games and the 1988 Olympic Games, the South Korean government was able to display its economic miracle to an international audience (Bridges, 2008). At the same time, during the more than seven years of the preparation process, the military regime could harness its citizens for the

successful delivery of these mega sporting events (Bairner, Lee, & Tan, 2016). In that sense, sport under the military regime was both a means of political control and a part of its populist policy.

### **About this special issue**

Thus far, I have identified the key characteristics of Korean nationalism today. These are post-colonial anti-imperialistic nationalism, pan-Korean ethnic nationalism, and South Korean state patriotic nationalism. As briefly discussed, sport is a meaningful social practice that reflects and reinforces these different types of Korean nationalism. This special issue contains articles that examine the relation between sport, national identity, and politics in South Korea. It should be noted that sporting cases and examples to be discussed in this issue are mainly concerned with South Korean sport. On this basis, some may problematize the title of the special issue: Examining Korean nationalisms, identities, and politics through sport. Yet, I argue that the memory of Japanese imperialism and the experience of the Korean War and the subsequent division have significantly influenced the formation of contemporary national identity in both contemporary Koreas. Equally, sport development on the two sides of the border mirrors these historical events. Therefore, while I accept that including one or two articles on North Korean sport would have certainly increased the quality of this project, I have no doubt that reading the six articles in this special issue will help readers to gain insight into complicated Korean identity politics as expressed through sport.

Ok and Park's paper attempts to uncover the origins of anti-Japanism in Korea. They argue that, by reviewing historical incidents from the medieval Korean kingdoms to the contemporary era, it is apparent that Korean people began to look at Japanese people with distrust from the medieval period onwards due to the frequent Japanese invasion of the

Korean peninsula. When Japan colonised Korea, this anti-Japanism intensified. Ok and Park stress that sport is one of the key cultural sites where the memory of Japanese invasion and colonial domination is remembered and represented, and thereby contributes to reinforcing the uneasy relations between Korea and Japan today.

Park and Lim's paper concerns the development of elite sport policy in South Korea and shows how the South Korean state's patriotic nationalism influences sport development in the country. This essay examines key characteristics of elite sport policy during different presidential administrations consisting of a series of military regimes and subsequent civilian governments. The authors argue that the successful development of high-performance sport is mainly derived from governmental exploitation of political and ideological values embedded in Korean sport. This article indicates that sport is an important means of displaying the glory of the nation which exemplifies the way in which sport is utilised to reaffirm the South Korean state's patriotic nationalism.

Bridges' essay reviews North and South Korean relations in sport. In particular, the author examines the inter-Korean sporting dialogue to discuss the possibility of forming a joint team for major sporting competitions such as the Olympic Games and the Asian Games so that the two Koreas' communal national identity can be displayed to an international audience. Yet, the author notes that it is by no means an easy task to organise a unified Korean team mainly because the political self-interest of each Korea often undermines sporting union of the two sides. This tendency is indicative of the conflicted relations between pan-Korean ethnic nationalism and the Korean states' patriotic nationalism.

Cho's article deals with the issues related to Korean swimming star, Tae-Hwan Park. By looking at the media discourse of this Korean sport celebrity circulated within online sport communities and discussion groups, the author argues that the swimmer is a national celebrity who embodies nationalist sentiment and regional rivalry. At the same time, Cho suggests that the swimming star is a symbol of the new Korean masculinity which can be defined as individualistic and metrosexual manliness. This work demonstrates the relationship between the digital media, sport celebrities, and nationalism, and by doing so, it poses important questions about how Korean sporting nationalism will be rearticulated in the fast moving and densely networked global society.

Oh's paper also discusses Korean sport celebrity, focusing in this instance on the case of Miran Jang, a female weightlifter. Here the author pays attention to how Miran Jang's sporting success at the Olympic Games symbolises Korean national character largely connected to South Korean state patriotic nationalism. At the same time, the article also investigates how Jang's female identity is perceived by a group of audiences. The author reveals that due to the cultural tradition of Confucianism, the weightlifter's heavy and muscular body is, to some extent, seen as a deviant female body and, because of this, Miran Jang's sporting success is somewhat disparaged by the mainstream media.

The final paper in this special issue examines the South Korean government's sport for international development initiatives. Na and Dallaire critically review current sport for international development programmes and argue that these activities are largely short-term oriented and mainly concerned with increasing South Korea's influence on international sport governing bodies. This implies that South Korean state patriotic nationalism is at the core of this assistance programme. In this respect, the authors claim that the government must

redirect its international development through sport initiative, making more effort to develop sustainable international development programmes and focusing more on realising universal humanitarian values through sport.

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